

The celebrations planned for Independence Day this year are both numerous and heartfelt, and justly so. While this is a day of fireworks, of barbecues and picnics, of friends and families, it is also much more. It is an opportunity to reflect on our nation, our history, our progress, and our future. Americans can wish a happy birthday to our country, to the principles on which it is founded, to the spirit of freedom that vitalizes it. It is also an opportunity to remember that independence is rarely easy, that it is an honor as well as a privilege, and that sometimes, as happened at the birth of our nation, it is necessary that we fight for it.

What better time, then, to remember and recognize the men and women who have stepped to the fore when they were needed, who have carried the American flag to foreign soil, and who have given all they had to give to defend our nation and our interests. In this time of recognition, we must also recommit ourselves to fulfilling our nation's legacy of appreciation and commitment to the men and women who have worn the uniform in defense of liberty.

Regrettably, Bush Administration officials recently acknowledged a shortfall of \$1 billion to cover current health care needs at the Department of Veterans Affairs this year. This announcement comes after numerous attempts by Democrats to address the long known budget deficit in veterans' health care funding which has pushed the delivery of veterans' health care to the brink.

For the past two years, Democrats and Veterans Service Organizations have warned the Administration of a looming crisis and have offered more money to provide sufficient medical care funding for veterans. In fact, virtually all veterans groups, including the American Legion, the Disabled American Veterans, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Paralyzed Veterans of America have for years been telling Congress that the VA health care system is facing a financial emergency.

This shortage is due in large part to the steadfast refusal of the President and Congressional Republicans to provide adequate funding for veterans' health care – in fact, their budgets haven't even kept up with inflation. Democrats have offered alternative budgets with significant increases for veterans health care funding and attempted to add funds for veterans' medical care to Appropriations bills. These efforts would have been sufficient to prevent the shortfall we are now facing but they have been tenaciously denied.

The dire situation that has resulted from this lack of funding is clear. Hundreds of thousands of veterans are being told they cannot enroll in VA health care. Approximately 50,000 veterans

are waiting for a health care appointment, and that number continues to grow. Clinical positions across the system are not being filled. VA hospitals are having to defer purchases of critical medical equipment and are reporting shortages of medical supplies. Compounding all of these shortcomings, the number of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans who will rely on the VA for medical care is expected to rise dramatically.

In response to the Administration's disappointing mistake, I joined every single Democrat in the House of Representatives in urging the President to add at least \$1.3 billion to address the shortfall in veterans' health care funding that his Administration has identified. In addition, we requested that the President submit an amended fiscal year 2006 budget to account for the veterans' health care budget hole that is now evident for the upcoming fiscal year.

Taking care of veterans is very much a part of the continuing cost of war. President Bush can immediately correct this mistake by asking Congress to approve these additional funds for our veterans. There is no reason not to immediately fix this shortfall – we ought to do it for our veterans, and we ought to do it to show our troops that the VA system will be available to them when they return. We must fix the system to provide sufficient resources to meet the healthcare needs of more than 100,000 recently returned veterans -- and the 5 million other veterans who use the VA's health care facilities. At a time of war, funding for veterans must be made a clear and unmistakable priority.